

Health Care Authority Approves ABA Therapy for Medicaid Children Diagnosed with Autism

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OLYMPIA – Washington State's Health Care Authority has settled a lawsuit brought by the Washington Autism Alliance & Advocacy over coverage of Applied Behavior Analysis therapy, also known as ABA, for children diagnosed with autism or conditions classified as autism spectrum disorders.

The settlement was approved by U.S. District Court Judge Richard A. Jones. Effective January 1, 2013, the therapy will become part of the regular benefits in Apple Health for Kids, which includes all Medicaid children.

This benefit will be available to children enrolled in the Apple Health for Kids program below the age of 21 who have a variable range of difficulties with verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions and repetitive behaviors. A trained ABA therapist can analyze a child's behavior in response to the child's environment, then use ABA therapy to change the child's behavioral response.

"Recent evidence shows that this therapy has been effective and deserves to be covered by our benefit structure," said MaryAnne Lindeblad, Health Care Authority Director. "This is wonderful news for Medicaid parents and entire families who have had little recourse in the past in dealing with an autistic child. Too often, they were forced to extreme measures – even leaving the workforce to stay home or forgoing treatment because its cost was beyond an ordinary family's means."

"This settlement ensures children with autism and related disabilities have meaningful access to remediation of their condition, regardless of their funding sources" said Arzu Forough, Chief Executive Officer of Washington Autism Alliance & Advocacy. "This is a turning point for low-income Washington families involved with autism who have no other means of accessing medical treatment for their children. With HCA's leadership, we are entering a new era of meaningful access to evidence based treatment through Apple Health for Kids."

While the Health Care Authority expects to gain approval on ABA coverage from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services in January, it is working to extend interim ABA services to children until that time.

Gail Kreiger, a Registered Nurse and manager of Health Care Authority's Health Care Benefits and Utilization Management Office said, "Although the coverage change is effective on January 1, we are working with families of the children who have already been diagnosed and will help them navigate the pathway-to-care now. "Our first step will be to confirm that finding through a comprehensive evaluation by a Medicaid clinician who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment

of autism; in a second phase, we will work with parents and ABA therapists to obtain a functional assessment of the child's condition and a treatment plan."

Kreiger said approximately 9,000 children on Apple Health for Kids are at that initial stage of identification.

The Northwest Justice Project, a statewide legal aid program, represented the plaintiffs through its Medical Legal Partnership and worked with the state to mediate a comprehensive settlement to assure access to ABA therapy for all eligible children.

The Health Care Authority recently entered a similar agreement to extend ABA coverage to state and other government employees and their dependents who require ABA services. Providers who want more information on the ABA benefit or to identify a child with autism enrolled in Apple Health for Kids can contact the Health Care Authority via a special web page at <http://hrsa.dshs.wa.gov/abatherapy>.

Clients were being notified by mail this week of the pending benefit change.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR BACKGROUND:

- News release on UMP benefit change: www.hca.wa.gov/news_release/public-employees-enrolled-in-the-uniform-medical.html
- HCA's autism website: <http://hrsa.dshs.wa.gov/abatherapy>
- Email address for parents and providers to contact HCA: aba@hca.wa.gov
- HCA's news release archive: www.hca.wa.gov/news_releases.html

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